Commentary: Abolish nuclear weapons, say members of Peace Action Central New York

By Readers' Page

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By Diane Swords and Tom Bennett

President Barack Obama’s Prague statement calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons has been lauded worldwide. But Obama is a politician facing huge pressures. At Obama’s inauguration, Vincent Harding, close associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, stated of Obama that we must be “the wind at his back.” That is what many people, including Central New Yorkers, were doing at NGO events preceding the May 3 to 28 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty conference at the United Nations in New York City and throughout the month. Readers can do so as well, by contacting our elected representatives about the necessity of nuclear weapons abolition.

Today nine countries maintain nuclear arsenals, over 23,000 warheads, 95 percent of which are held by the United States and Russia. These uniquely destructive weapons can destroy life on our planet many times over. They are used as political weapons of terror, reinforcing global inequality.

Eradication of these weapons will end the threat of global annihilation and end this hierarchy of terror. It will unlock enormous resources to address global warming and mass poverty, and to lead in the global trend towards demilitarization.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), put into effect in 1970, has been signed by 189 countries. It mandates that non-nuclear weapons states cannot pursue nuclear weapons programs, and that nuclear states must make good-faith efforts to dismantle their arsenals. In spite of this, and other international resolutions since the bombings of Japan by the United States in 1945, nuclear weapons states have failed to fulfill the obligation to eliminate nuclear arms. Every five years an international conference assesses the level of treaty compliance, reviews the state of nuclear technology, and examines potential threats of nuclear proliferation. This 2010 review conference began May 3.

The NPT must be supported and strengthened, yet it lacks a concrete process to assure disarmament by nuclear powers. It is also complicated by grave problems with Article IV, which guarantees the right to “peaceful nuclear energy,” but overlooks the inextricable link between nuclear power and weapons and their health and environmental costs.

Nuclear abolition is not a radical idea. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev came very close to an abolition agreement in 1986, with Reagan’s Strategic Defense

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Initiative (Star Wars) breaking the deal. In January 2007, former Secretary of State George Schultz, former Defense Secretary William Perry, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former Senator Sam Nunn published a piece in The Wall Street Journal calling for “a world free of nuclear weapons.”

The world is approaching a nuclear tipping point, where it can strengthen the nonproliferation regime or risk that dozens more countries acquire nuclear weapons, creating greater yet danger of global annihilation.

The NPT Review Conference presents a precious opportunity to make our world more secure. This opportunity must not be missed. The START agreement reached by President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev for bilateral reductions of strategic nuclear weapons is very welcome, but a small step. The goal of global abolition cannot be postponed. Only by setting a clear timetable and process for nuclear disarmament can the NPT regime halt the proliferation that threatens us all.

We urge everyone to educate themselves on these issues, become involved in groups such as Peace Action CNY (www.peaceactioncny.org) and contact their elected representatives about the necessity of eliminating nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.

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